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ABSTRACT

Reading as a pastime is basic to creativity and intellectual mind expansion as well as to the appropriate development of listening skills. Reasons for the decline of listening and communication skills can be attributed in part to misuse of media, to latch-key children, to decreased support from parents for reading at home, to lack of sufficient stress by teachers on the importance of pleasure reading, as well as to drugs and alcohol abuse and even to over emphasis on skills programs in the schools. Identifying problems is nearly always less difficult than finding viable solutions. Some short-range suggestions to remedy the problem include: (1) merchandising the importance of being intellectually well-rounded; (2) making time available in the classroom for pleasure reading; and (3) using less but better quality testing. A complete reorganization of the secondary education program is also recommended. (RAE)

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READING AS A PASTIME: COMPETITION FOR TIME IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Historical Knowledge, primarily as a result of technology, is increasing geometrically. As early as 1970 it was estimated that man's accumulated knowledge was doubling every three months. If you accept this premise, it might be concluded that perhaps knowledge is now doubling at a daily rate. Considering all of the strides made in computer science during the past eighteen years alone, the mind-boggling possibilities for the future are evident.

Technology can be, and is, both good and bad. Labor-saving devices designed for preserving time often result in a devious, unexpected time consumption. Often time isn't really saved at all. Rather, is is re-distributed. Consequently, we often end up with less disposable time rather than more.

Technology also has another side which may be counter productive. Labor-saving devices can, and often do, diminish the desire for creativity and mind expansion. A very special kind of talent is required of students to overcome the temptation to follow the "least line of resistance." The "softer" life becomes, the greater the tendency is for students not to invest their energy into reading as a pastime and other mind-expanding activities. There is an even greater talent required of teachers to help students overcome this natural tendency towards lethargy.

There are other contemporary time impediments and detractors which inundate today's elementary school aged children. Pressures of society to "keep up" and "forge ahead" constantly bombard students and teachers alike. Students receive much of their stimuli from the media, and teachers receive much of theirs from the authorities - which is often legislated. Sadly, the profit motive has been foremost in our society for several years. More, cheaper, and quicker seems to have been the "battle cry." The economy has often fostered change in attitude

and substance. In times of national crisis or financial difficulties, educational demands have been more conservative-- more basic, if you will. In times of national prosperity educational expectations have been more liberal, more comprehensive, with education more for the "whole child." This helps stimulate creativity, perhaps existential in nature.

Contemporary Problems "Reading as a pastime" is basic to creativity and intellectual mind expansion. It is even basic to the appropriate development of listening skills. The ability to skillfully create images in your "mind's eye" about the story you are reading is much the same skill needed to be an effective listener. This is one reason, among others, for the decline of listening and communication skills.

There are perhaps many contemporary reasons that "reading as a pastime" is becoming an almost lost artform. Among some of the reasons which can be attributed to today's society are:

(1) The mis-use (or over-use) of television, video games, and musical videos,

(2) Latch-key children,

(3) Decreased support for reading at home, often even from parents who are there-- this is especially true for recreational reading,

(4) Often the lack of sufficient stress by teachers on the importance of "pleasure reading" at school, and

(5) Drugs and alcohol abuse.

These are only some of the somewhat obvious reasons for the decline in pleasure reading. There are others which are more elusive, and certainly very difficult with which to deal. The re-occuring so-called "back-to-the basics" concept has inadvertently contributed to the decline in pleasure reading. Very often the interpretation of "basics" has been just more of the skills already being taught.

Closely aligned to "back-to-the-basics" is the "skills programs" concept. Few people would argue that basic skills are not important. However, more skills programs usually mean cutting many of the things considered important in educating the "whole child." Chief among these is "reading as a pastime." When focusing an almost endless amount of time on predetermined and specified skills in three or four different academic areas, a considerable loss of teaching flexibility occurs. This time consumption along with the required meticulous record keeping, consumes an inordinate part of the day. Those elements of the curriculum usually sacrificed are arts, aesthetics, creative dramatics, and pleasure reading.

One area of concern is that of legislated mandates. It would be difficult to deny the right or advisability of public involvement in the educational process. However, political expediency or pressure has sometimes taken precedence over the appropriateness of educational legislation. Often those who are professionally least informed are the ones in the position of making many of the important educational decisions. Including new areas and dimensions to the public school curriculum may be popular to the masses, but often difficult to implement. Excluding or replacing segments of the curriculum are often unpopular to the same degree as "new ones" are popular. One might conclude, then, that a saturation point is inevitable. From what source is the additional time to come? Again, the arts, aesthetics, creative dramatics, and pleasure reading are likely the casualities. Under severe time constraints, science and social studies also suffer. The point is, of course, "more" is not necessarily "better."

Another concern which can greatly influence the amount of disposable time allocated to the teacher, deals with duplication and lack of coordinated efforts. Parents and teachers both want what is best for the children, but the lack of well-planned co-operative efforts sometimes diminishes expected results. Time must be frugally utilized, and consumed in such a way as to produce the greatest results. In some cases this may mean more flexibility on the part of parents and teachers

Coordinated efforts among teachers are also important in establishing the appropriate formula for best time utilization. Time consumption can be complicated by over-lapping assignments and lessons, both within the different grades, and within the same grade level.

For example, a unit or two on dinosaurs may be appropriate. However, studying dinosaurs every year from grades 1 through 6 is questionable. The time could be better utilized on other skills or areas of importance.

Students need to be involved with teachers in carefully planning their time. Understanding the tasks and skills which must be accomplished and how best to accomplish them should be a high cooperative priority.

A more insidious consumption of time may be a result of our fast-pace society and accompanying peer pressure. There are an incredible number of detractors which are imposed on society, many of which are the result of the explosion of technology. Life-styles are greatly affected by this overstimulation of things to do, places to go, and tasks to perform. Too often, this leaves precious little time for pastime reading.

Possible Solutions Identification of problems are nearly always less difficult than viable solutions. Little can be done about the overstimulation and fast pace for which our society has become accustomed. Better cooperation between parents, students, and teachers can, however, make a significant difference. The following is a list of both long-range and short-range suggestions:

(1) Fewer individual basic skills and more integrated skills,

(2) Extol the virtues of reading and other mind-expanding activities,

(3) Merchandise the importance of being intellectually well-rounded,

(4) Encourage reading as an important and pleasurable free-time activity,

(5) More and better correlation of subject matter, basic skills, and academic areas,

A. Make different academic areas interdependent and intersupporting

B. Avoid being repetitious--both in content and delivery

C. Relate subject-matter to "life experiences" as a member of society and as a consumer

(6) Involve parents (guardians) and students in a cooperative effort for better organization of time,

(7) Make a little time available for "pleasure reading" each and every day, where nothing is allowed to interrupt the student,

(8) Suggest to parents that time be made available at home perhaps twice a week for pleasure reading, involving the whole family,

(9) Vertical coordination and correlation of subject matter/ skills among teachers of different grade levels, and

(10) Less testing, with a concentrated effort on the quality of testing that is done.

The final suggestion as a possible solution to the problem of "shrinking" available time, is a complete reorganization of the secondary education program. It may be necessary to completely eliminate the Carnegie unit system, and reconstruct secondary education. This might include some or all of the following:

(1) Increase the number of years to high school from 4 to 5 years,

(2) Develop a multi-tracking system which would accommodate students of different interests and ability,

(3) Utilize advance placement for elementary and middle schools,

(4) Begin tracking in the middle school,

(5) Cooperatively plan the educational programs all the way from Kindergarten through High School--to avoid duplication and to insure continuity,

(6) Provide more funds for materials, equipment, and salaries,

(7) Make a concerted effort to include elements in the curricula which will better educate the "whole student," and not just provide for the basic skills, and

(8) Teach students to think and solve problems.

We can only survive as a nation of intellectual giants when and if we learn to better control the allocation of time. To truly be educated today, one must be well-rounded and well-informed about many things in society. This must come, in no small measure, from a devotion to "Reading as a Pastime."